THE TYPOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE ITALIAN VILLA FROM ITS ORIGINS TO THE 16TH CENTURY

The villas built in Italy over the centuries have together constituted a typological phenomenon systematically bound to the structure of the garden. Such phenomenon was more widespread and entailed more diversification than anywhere else. The evolution of the villas, determined by particular economic, social, and cultural conditions, went hand in hand with the country's historical and political development and was at times clearly the result of the close cooperation that grew up between the artist and his patron (the latter often being spurred on by the same desire to attain prestige that had led the aristocratic families to build themselves luxurious dwellings).

The prime example came from the Romans for whom the villa had represented a way to arrive at a more direct contact with nature based upon agriculture and their love for country living. Moreover, as Cicero put it, a restful stay in the villa meant that the city dweller could achieve intellectual self-fulfillment sublimating his own individuality far from the hectic city life. In the city, he noted, even the homes of the very wealthy were modest since, on account of the overcrowded urbanistic structure, i.e. heavily built up neighborhoods and narrow roadways, it was impossible for the city to spread out. On the other hand, the villa gave the well-to-do Romans the opportunity to show off their wealth, not only by the size and number of buildings the villa was composed of, but also by the profusion of works of art with which it was embellished.

As was true of every work of architecture, the villa played an important part in the history of Roman building: a whole branch of literature ranging from Cato to Varro bears witness to the Romans' agricultural heritage, while Vitruvius set forth practical norms for the rational spatial layout of buildings. Yet we cannot speak of a real typology of the villa, which continued to follow the general development of civil architecture and which is thus often compared to the development of the domus.

The utilitarian aspect of the Roman villa is shown time and time again by its division into agricultural and residential sections. This division first appears in the 3rd century B.C. in keeping with changes in Roman economic and social life. Thus, the villa was composed of two clearly distinctive buildings: the « rustic » villa, constructed like rural buildings, and the « urban » villa. The rustic villa was built to house the farmhands and their foreman (vilicus) *and included storerooms, stalls, granaries. Since aesthetic considerations played no part, it was strictly a work of construction engineering. On the other hand, the urban villas, generally set into a spacious sea or landscape, was designed for the owner of the whole complex and was thus a reflection of his personal taste and financial possibilities. Nevertheless, it is also true that not all the villas displayed such a distinction, as several consisted of a single building set into landscaped and wooded areas.*

The patrician villa, more complex since it consisted of several constructions, had geometric gardens symmetrically laid out so that, together with the buildings, the garden was an element added to the surrounding landscape.

The art of garden architecture (ars topiaria) *was born towards the end of the Republican period, based upon the examples of Lucullus in his villa at the Pincio and Sallust in the gardens between the Quirinal and the Porta Collina. Plinius attributes the origin of the art of garden architecture to C. Matius Calvena, who was a friend of the Emperor Augustus.*

The Roman garden in its simplicity pivoted around a central clearing with a decorative fountain in the center. Radiating from this space were the